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A Day in the Life of a Hero: The Three Unities in C.S. Lewis's Neo-Classical Romance

Joe R. Christopher
Tarleton University

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Tarleton State University

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Tarleton State University

Introduction: The Three Unities

The last two words of this essay's subtitle are a deliberate non-sequitur, of course. Originally considered, the romance is a medieval genre, reflecting a chivalric age (Holman and Harmon 283); it has come to mean a type of adventure story, often with fantasy, often with significant symbolism, sometimes involving love between a hero and heroine—still retaining some of the tone of the medieval romances. On the other hand, the neo-classical impulse is based on imitations or parodies of the Greek and Roman classics (cf. 314, 315). The argument here is that C. S. Lewis's "The Nameless Isle" shows the influence of the three unities as understood by the Italian critics of the sixteenth century, the French critics of seventeenth, and by such English critics as John Dryden in the later seventeenth. The classical source of this criticism is the *Poetics* by Aristotle. Thus, "The Nameless Isle" is, in its way, a neo-classical work, even though the three unities were understood to apply to dramas, not narrative poems.

Here is a basic statement of the three unities:

> 1. The *unity of action* [or plot]: a play should have one main action that it follows, with no or few subplots.
> 2. The *unity of place*: a play should cover a single physical space and should not attempt to compress geography, nor should the stage represent more than one place. [However, "{s}ome critics were content to have the action confined merely to the same town or city" (Holman and Harmon 489).]
> 3. The *unity of time*: the action in a play should take place over no more than 24 hours. ("Classical unities.")[1]

As said, the critics who established these three unities for dramas pointed to Aristotle's *Poetics* as the basis of these rules. Thus the *classicism* in *neo-classicism*. Actually, as is generally known among students, Aristotle only set up as a rule that a drama should have one unified plot (or "action"). He observed that plays normally are restricted in time to twenty-four hours ("a single revolution of the sun") or slightly more—but this was said only in contrast to the greater scope of an epic, not as a rule. And he said nothing about unity of place at all; that was developed by the Italian critics by analogy to the unity of time ("Classical unities"; Holman and Harmon 488-489). Thus the *neo* in *neo-classicism*.

A traditional contrast of British dramas to show (or not show) the unities is that between Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (probably written in 1606 or 1607) and John Dryden's *All for Love; or, The World Well Lost* (1677). Shakespeare's drama violates the unity of place, as E. K. Chambers

writes: "Rome, Misenum, Athens, Actium, Syria, Egypt are the localities, with much further subdivision in the Egyptian scenes" (qtd. Wilders 20). Shakespeare violates the unity of time, with his play spread over ten years (from actions by Antony in his forty-second year until his death [Wilders 87]). Shakespeare violates the unity of plot, with a political conflict over the rule of the Roman Empire; for example, "the battles in which this contest [is] fought out occupy much of the third and fourth acts" (Wilders 2); also, there is what may be called the tragedy of Enobarbus, ending with his suicide in Act 4, Scene 9. On the other hand, Dryden's play "occupies only the last day of [Antony and Cleopatra's] lives and is confined throughout to Alexandra" (Wilders 13). Thus, unity of time and place. The unity of plot is maintained in the focus on Antony and Cleopatra—for example, Enobarbus does not appear in Dryden's play (cf. Wilder 13).

The cultural difference that seventy years made in dramatic theory and practice makes it sound as if Shakespeare was entirely adverse to the unities, but two of his plays—*Comedy of Errors* and *The Tempest*—are often cited as observing the three unities. This is certainly true of Shakespeare's reworking of Plautus's *Menaechmi* as the *Comedy of Errors*, allowing for some casual shifts of place within Ephesus. Perhaps a strict Italian or French critic would have been upset by Shakespeare's first scene in *The Tempest* occurring off shore, not on the island upon which the rest of the action is placed; but, except for that possible violation of the unity of place, and again allowing for shifts of locale on the island, the rest of the play obeys the unities.[2]

With this background on the three unities, Lewis's "The Nameless Isle" may now be considered, to this degree as if it were a dramatic work and not a narrative.

The Unity of Time

First, the unity of time will be elaborately traced. But, as an introduction, it must be admitted that Lewis's opening lines must be omitted from the thesis. He has an opening (ll. 1-61a) about the mariner who is his protagonist, his ship and shipmates, and the storm which destroys the ship and drowns all the rest of the crew. All this is background to the mariner being the sole survivor, ending on the island, "The Nameless Isle" (as Walter Hooper chose to title the poem [Hooper xii]). The mariner is exhausted after safely reaching the shore, and falls asleep. After that opening, the present survey of the unity of time begins with the mariner waking from his sleep. Lewis writes in the voice of his protagonist:

> Certainly when sleep left me
> There was calm and cool. No crashing
> of the sea,
> But darkness all about. Dim-shadowed
> leaves
> In mildest air moved above me,
> And, over all, earth-scented smell
> Sweetly stealing about the sea-worn
> man,[3]
> And faintly, as afar, fresh-water sounds,
> Runnings and ripplings upon rock
> stairs
> Where moss grows most. (61b-69a)[4]

So the basic narrative begins in the **night**, with the "darkness" around the mariner. After a song is heard, a second description appears:

> The clouds parted
> Suddenly. The seemly, slow-gliding
> moon
> Swam, as it were in shallows, of the
> silver cloud,
> Out into the open, and with orb'd
> splendor
> She gleamed upon the groves of a great
> forest. (83b-86)

The description of the forest continues. What follows that passage is the appearance of the Queen; shortly thereafter, in a vision she is seen as a type of earth-mother; next, she talks the mariner into going to rescue her daughter

from the wizard, the enchanter, who has taken (she says) half of the island for his rule.

After the Queen leaves or vanishes comes the **dawn**:

> Dawn was round me,
> Cool and coloured, and there came a
> breeze
> Brushing the grasses. Birds were
> chattering. (227b-29)

At this point, the narrator is still in the forest; with the sword the Queen has given him, he journeys out of the forest into a landscape of downs, with far hills.

The next temporal step occurs at **mid-morning**; the poem is specific:

> Half-way in heav'n to his highest throne
> The gold sun glittering had gained
> above[.] (259-260)

In short, the sun is halfway to noontime. At this point, the mariner discovers the golden flute, lying in grasses beside a brook. The Queen earlier and the wizard later give different accounts of how the flute was lost; the mariner, after finding he is unable to play it, puts it in his pouch.

By **noon**, the narrator has gone further west. Again, the time is indicated by the sun:

> Bright above me on the bridge of noon[5]
> Sun was standing, shadows dwindled,
> Heat was hovering in a haze that
> danced
> Upon rocks about my road. (284-87a)

At this point, the mariner discovers a group of statues of men and a living dwarf. The dwarf explains the statues are the wizard's heroic transformations of half the crew of a different ship (not the one the narrator was master mariner on), the other half of that crew having been transformed to animals by the Queen. During this conversation, the time is repeated: "Noon was burning / Bright about us" (368b-369a).

The mariner forces the dwarf to guide him to where the wizard may be found. They reach the west coast of the island in the **evening**:

> Day was dropping to the dazzling plain
> Of the waves westward. Winging
> homeward
> Came the flying flocks; flowers were
> closing,
> Level light over the land was poured.
> (383-87)

The mariner sees in a valley the statue of a maiden. The wizard is also there, and he argues for the mariner to drink his potion which will turn him to stone, just as has the maiden drunk, the maiden being the wizard's daughter As the mariner is poised to drink, the time has advanced to **sunset**:

> In the west, scarlet,
> Day was dying. Dark night apace
> Over earth's eastern edge towards us
> Came striding up. Stars, one or two,
> Had lit their lamps. (491b-95a)

At this point comes the turn in the action, that which Tolkien calls the eucatastrophe. The dwarf plays the flute that the mariner had found and kept. As he starts to play, the time sequence is reinforced: "light was waning" (517b) the poem says. The playing causes several transformations, changing the dwarf to an elf with angel-like wings, returning the statues to life, recalling the wizard inwardly to his old love for the Queen.

The wizard, the elf (still playing the flute), the former statues, and the mariner journey on foot eastward. They walk "On flowers folded" (595a). The **night-time** is described:

> Earth-breathing scents
> On mildest breeze moved towards us.
> Cobwebs caught us. Clear-voiced, an
> owl
> To his kind calling clove the darkness,
> The fox, further, was faint barking.
> (598b-602)

The description continues as they reach "the country of downs" (603b) that is evidently a halfway point:

> Glory breaking
> Unclosed the clouds. Clear and golden
> Out into the open swam the orb'd
> splendor
> Of a moon, marvellous. (605b-08a)

Then, without more description of their walking, they are at the edge of the dark forest. From it come centaurs and the Queen, all also transformed, presumably by the flute playing—the mariners turned animals are now centaurs and the Queen is back in love with the magician.

A third description of the **night** is offered briefly, after the magician and the Queen are reconciled with a love song together:

> The fields of air
> Beamed more brightly. About the
> moon
> More than a myriad mazy weavings
> Of fire flickered. Far off there rolled
> Summer thunder. (673b-77a)

This seems more a brighter moment in the night-time to reflect the love between the Queen and the magician than really time sequence. And in the last fifty lines of the poem half a dozen more references to the moonlight appear (694b, 696a, 710a, 719b, 724b-725, 729b), adding nothing to the temporal sequence. No positional shift in the sky by the moon is traced.

This summarizes the unity of time in "The Nameless Isle." It should be remembered that Aristotle observed that Greek plays normally covered a fictional period of twenty-four hours or slightly more. It was the later critics who said that a play should take place in no more than twenty-four hours. Lewis's romance moves from night-time when the mariner awakes until he, the young woman (the daughter of the magician and the Queen), and the elf (formerly a dwarf) leave the island during the next night. It is twenty-four hours and perhaps slightly more. Of course, the journey that took a whole daytime to make by the mariner is retraced in the reverse direction reversed during the night, before the next morning comes, and a ship is built from trees felled in the eastern forest during the same night—but those are aspects of this being a romance, not a classical play.

One passage in the poem needs to be considered some more, but not as part of the time sequence. This passage is the poem's long introduction. This is not a defense of the opening in terms of the unity of time, but simply a conjecture of the influence of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* on Lewis's poem. As has been pointed out before, Lewis's poem began from his experience of the plot of Mozart's *Magic Flute* (King 341 n16), so the basic content, as such, is not from Shakespeare. But certainly some parallels to *The Magic Flute* might have drawn Lewis's attention to *The Tempest*: the young lovers, with the male having to undergo a trial; the young woman with a magician for mother or father; the emphasis on magic; the would-be-rapist assistant (Monostatos in the opera, Caliban in the play), for example. One suggestion that Lewis had Shakespeare in mind is the simple fact that he did not use the more-or-less Egyptian setting of *The Magic Flute*; the island suggests *The Tempest*. A second is that he shaped his central plot according the unities—one of these unities has been argued; the other two will be be discussed after this Shakespearean consideration. And a third simple fact is that Lewis also begins his poem with a shipwreck and ends it with a leaving of the island, as Shakespeare does *The Tempest*. (King mentions the opening of both works with a storm [146].) Although Lewis spends the first sixteen lines of his poem on the voyage before the storm (1-16a), and Shakespeare begins with the ship in the storm, Lewis does develop the events of the storm fully in the following forty-one lines (16b-57). Shakespeare cannot show the actual results on stage, since all except the actual sailors leap into the sea and swim to shore, and Ariel

preserves the lives of all and their ship, without their knowing his aid (1.2.208-237); Lewis describes—or, rather, has his narrator describe—the powerful wave that lifts him alone over the rocks before the shore (41b-57). At the end of the last act, Prospero and most of the others are planning to return to Naples by ship the next morning; Lewis's three are on ship, leaving from the island in the night-time, steered by the elf. It is as if Ferdinand, Miranda, and Caliban-magically-turned-into-Ariel were all that returned to Naples, and they left in the late evening. Technically, the last thirty-two lines are not set on the island, so they, like the introduction, are not part of the unity of place, although still part of the unity of time (710b-742).

The Unity of Place

The unity of place having been mentioned, it can next be considered. As was said with the unity of time, the maritime opening must be omitted from consideration—and in the case of the unity of place, the maritime conclusion also. But the basic fable, from the awakening on the island to the leaving of it, is all laid in a single setting, the island itself. As was said earlier, some, more rigid critics insisted on only one setting: they would demand one spot on the island for all the scenes. Other, more liberal critics—but still in the neo-classical tradition—allowed for any setting in the same town. Here, the same island is used. The protagonist crosses it twice, from the east coast to the west and then back. Of course, Lewis's poem being a narrative, the walking is narrated—unlike Shakespeare's play where scene designations are sometimes "Another part of the Island" (e.g. 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3), and the play, in production, is simply a matter of characters entering—at least, if it is produced simply, in something like the original production at the Globe. Thus, the previous discussion of the unity of time has basically shown that Lewis has, also, within his format of the narrative work, observed the unity of place.

The Unity of Plot

The third unity, that of plot or "action," takes more discussion than the unity of place. What does one mean by plot? A simple view will be offered here: a plot is based on some type of complication or conflict, and the resolution of the plot is merely the resolution of that complication or conflict in one way or another. A tragic work most often resolves the conflict by someone dying (Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* substitutes a blinding for a death). A romantic plot in the modern sense of *romantic* usually resolves the conflict by two people getting married (as in Jane Austen's novels). A religious plot may resolve its conflict by someone having a vision of God (both the Book of Job and Dante's *Divine Comedy* do this).

What is the conflict in "The Nameless Isle"? Unlike a realistic work in which the mariner would be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder over the loss of his ship and the loss of all his crewmates and his barely explainable survival, Lewis's poem is a romance (in fantasy sense as well as, and perhaps more than, in Jane Austen's sense). In the poem, the shipwreck is a means of getting the protagonist to the island, but it is soon forgotten as the events in the new setting occur. Perhaps, in some non-rational sense, the discovery of the enchanted sailors from a different ship is meant to satisfy the need for the rescue of the mariner's sailors from death; here, the island's crew are rescued from the deathlike state of being marble statues or from the reduction to being below the human level as animals).

Another way to consider the conflict is to contrast this poem with a detective story—with a problem over two differing accounts of a theft. The Queen says that the wizard stole her flute and has it in "a strange prison," where it is "unloved" (209b, 210a); presumably by "unloved" she means it is not

played. She claims the results of playing it are to increase the growth of plants (the whole passage, 201-212a). On the other hand, the wizard says the Queen stole the flute which had been made by the ancient ruler of the earth as a gift for the magician's daughter; the Queen could not get the flute to make music, so she threw it away (468b-474, 480-83a). The protagonist, as the detective, would have to discover if the Queen just assumed it was locked away because it was not being played, so the prison reference was not a deliberate lie. On the other hand, since the flute was found lying in the grasses by the stream, the protagonist must decide if the wizard's account is accurate about the throwing away, as it seems to be—but did the Queen actually throw it away or did the magician do it and say that she did it? Her description of the flowers responding to the flute suggests she played it, while the magician says she was not able to. But this is a fantasy romance: these differences in testimony are never resolved—instead, the resolution is in the playing of the flute.

The basic conflict in "The Nameless Isle," then, is an archetypal one: an earth goddess—the "earth goddess" is meant seriously because the Queen, in a vision, takes to her breasts and nurses the animals of the forest (113-141a)—*vs*. a man who is against nature and proclaims a type of timeless existence as statuary. As has been mentioned, after the dwarf produces music on the flute, the wizard and the Queen are reconciled in love, as husband and wife. Thus the conflict is ended. With the playing of the flute, hatred is turned—or re-turned—to love.

But along with this basic conflict, two others exist in the poem. An Italian critic might insist that Aristotle said only one plot was appropriate in a play—so here, a triple plot is a flaw. Actually, in the sixteenth century, at least, the neo-classical critics seemed mainly intent on outlawing a serious play with a comic subplot (Holdman and Harmon 488). One can see the obvious question of unity in such works. The definition of the unity of action that was given earlier referred to "no *or few* subplots" (stress added), and that would allow "The Nameless Isle" within the rules.

Actually, the two other conflicts in Lewis's poem are echo plots of the main one, thus reinforcing the work's impact. First, the ship's crew being turned into statues or animals obviously echoes the views of the wizard, for a stony escape from life, and of the Queen, for a type of unity with nature. With the flute music, the resolution is a return to humanity, to a degree, but with aspects of the two views: humanlike but shaped like Greek heroic figures or half human and half horse. So their problem of being unfairly changed by the two polarities of the poem is resolved appropriately.

The other subplot is that of the mariner and the daughter of the archetypal couple. In theory, this is an echo of the wizard and the Queen, and their resolution in love. In actuality, it seems to be an account of a young man seeking to find love. After all, the "protagonist" of the poem—as he has been called in this essay, occasionally—should have his own plot. When he wakes and meets the Queen, he "Dreaming of druery, and with many a dear craving / Wooed the woman under the wild forest" (104-05); she laughs at his protestations and tells him she is too old for him—and suggests her daughter. Actually, his reaction to an archetypal nature goddess seems appropriately sexual, but a finding of an appropriate real woman as a substitute for some dream figure seems, though not archetypal, still an average experience for a young man. It is possible to read the magician's suggestion that the young man drink his potion and become a statue to reflect a protective father trying to cut down on a young man's sexual designs on his daughter—perhaps this is too mundane to fit the archetypal romance. At any rate, the poem suggests that the young woman has to be awakened to sexuality. In the poem, when the dwarf-turned-elf is playing the flute, one of the transformations is *after* he returns her from stone to human:

> But the wing'd wonder […]

> […]
> Danced to my dear one. Druery he
> taught her,
> Bent her, bowed her, bent never before,
> Brought her, blushing as it were a bride
> mortal,
> To hold to her heart my head as I
> kneeled,
> Faint in that ferly [….] (576a-582a)

So "[d]ruery he taught her." A number of sources suggest that often middle-class young women in Victorian England went to their bridal beds knowing nothing about sexuality, such was the prudery of the time and the emphasis on chaperones (e.g., "Victorian morality" [under subsection "Description"]). The poem, with the woman turned to stone, suggests a late arousal to sexual impulses. The magician says that she, as a statue, is removed from the problems of the world: "Chaste, enchanted, till the change of the world, / In beauty she abides" (422-423a). The change of the world came sooner than he expected, with the playing of the flute, and Sigmund Freud would have understood the flute as a symbol of arousal to life and to passion. In short, the magical transformation caused in the case of the young couple seems wholly to have been on her side—but, as the magician and the Queen come to their love later in the poem, so here at least the young couple are together. After being "[f]aint in that ferly," the young man says he was "frail, mortal man" *until* (he goes on) "I was love-learnëd both to learn and teach / Love with that lady" (582-83a). Does the poem suggest he was not long "[f]aint in that ferly" but responded, despite the audience of statues-turned-men, the dwarf-turned-elf, and the magician?[6] If so, perhaps they were gentlemen and turned away. Or one can assume he was a "frail, mortal man" until the honeymoon started, either on the boat at the end of the poem or in England. The "till" (until) in the poem is not a clear time indication (582a).

These three plots reflect the major conflicts in the poem: the estrangement of the magician and the Queen; the enchantment of the crew, restricting their humanity; and the need for love by the young couple. As has been said above, this romance, besides being a romance in the fantasy sense, is also a romance in two of its plots in the Jane Austen sense. Perhaps a fourth plot should be added. In the most obvious terms, the dwarf-turned-elf, in his playing of the flute, is simply the mechanism for the resolutions in the poem. But he also has two thwarted desires that are resolved in the poem, both expressed while he is still in the form of the ugly dwarf. First, he laments for his crewmates turned to stone, although they mistreated him when they were alive (318b-332a, 339b). Clearly, this problem is resolved when he flutes them back to enobled life; they greet him with kisses and call him king (549b-550, 555b-56). His second conflict—a desired change—is his wish to return to Kent, the county in England. He says to the narrator,

> ['] […] here I stay, hoping
> Always, if ever such an hour should
> come[,]
> To drink before I die out of the deep
> tankard,
> And to eat ham and eggs in my home
> country
> That is the weald of Kent. And I wish
> that I was there.' (361b-65)

When he takes out the flute, he says to the wizard:

> ['] I trust even now […]
> That I shall drink before I die out of a
> deep tankard
> In the weald of Kent, will you, nill you!'
> (513a, 514-15)

After the transformations and the reconciliation of the wizard and the Queen, it is the wizard who says they should "send" the elf back to England (686a). This being a fantasy romance, one should not ask what the effect will be when a tall elf with angel-like wings strides into an inn and orders ham, eggs, and beer. But the elf does hold the wheel of the boat as he and the young couple

leave the nameless isle. Thus, his problems are also resolved, partly through his flute playing and partly through indebtedness due to his flute playing.

Conclusion

Overall, Lewis's poem shows a basic planned adherence to the three unities, once one makes allowances for it being a narrative work, not a play. The main part of the poem has the unity of time, although—since this is a romance—the night-time seems a bit more elastic in its hours than does the day. The unity of place is obvious—one island for the main part of the poem. The unity of plot could be argued, but a primary plot with closely related subplots will get by.

This essay has not been a discussion of the meaning of the poem but rather an analysis of one aspect of its artistry.[7] One handbook on literature says, "The concentration and strength that result from efforts at attaining *unity of action, time, and place* may be regarded as dramatic virtues" (Holman and Harmon 489). The same concentration and strength may be seen in Lewis's romance.

Notes

[1] Popular sources have been used for this discussion of the three unities to show that this is common knowledge in the study of literature. No need was felt to cite passages from Lodovico Castelvetro to show the Italian background, let alone from Aristotle in Greek.

[2] That *The Tempest* takes place in less than a day is clear, but the precise number of hours is not. The first specific time reference is in I.2.239-240, in a discussion between Prospero and Ariel. Ariel says it is past noon ("Past the mid season") and Prospero says it is at least 2:00 p.m. ("At least two glasses," measuring by hour-glasses). How long the storm lasted (depicted in I.1) is not certain, but at the start of I.2, Miranda indicates (in the opening speech) that the storm is still going on (although the ship is no longer seen by her—she thinks it sank). Thus the storm may have lasted from about 1:00 p.m. to 2.00; perhaps it may be imagined to have started earlier. The next specific time reference is in V.1.4, again in a conversation between Prospero and Ariel, the latter saying the time is "On the sixth hour." Presumably that means the time is nearly 6:00 p.m. But at that point the difficulties begin: three references to a three-hour period occur later in Act V. In V.1.136-7, Alonso says that the Italian nobles "three hours since / Were wrack'd upon this shore[.]" In V.1.186, Alonso asks his son who the woman is he is playing chess with, saying "What is this maid with whom thou wast at play? / Your eld'st acquaintance cannot be three hours[.]" This fits well enough with Alonso saying the shipwreck occurred three hours earlier. The third time reference is in V.i.2243, by the Boatswain, who says their ship is fine, despite the fact "but three glasses since, we gave out split[.]" The logical problem is that three hours before the six o'clock that Ariel announced is three in the afternoon, not before two o'clock, as the earlier references would place the seeming shipwreck. One strong possibility is that Shakespeare wanted in the three-hour references to suggest that everything had happened in the length of the time of the play on the stage, no matter what he had indicated earlier. (Of course, one could say that Alonso and the Boatwain have been enchanted and so have lost track of time, but that is a scholarly quibble, not part of the explanations on the stage.)

[3] The use of the third person ("man") for the narrator may be a sign of an earlier version of the poem written entirely in the third person, but it is not conclusive, for a rhetorical reference to oneself in the third person is possible.

[4] Quotations are given by line number, not page, so that when Don W. King's *The Complete Poems of C. S. Lewis: A Critical Edition* appears in the fall of 2014, this essay may be used with it as well as with the *Narrative Poems* edition.

[5] A googling of "bridge of noon" shows that this is a fairly common phrase, at least in poetry. Perhaps it comes from the "bridge" point at which ante-meridian becomes post-meridian; it does not appear under bridge[1] in the OED (as of 17 May 2014).

[6] Lewis never describes the statues as being with or without clothing, probably deliberately. The maiden holding the mariner's head to her heart obviously becomes more erotic if she is naked.

[7] For one reading of the meaning, a reading in terms of Lewis's early life, see this author's essay listed in the Works Cited.

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